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3M to Discontinue Some Scotchgard Repellent Products

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WASHINGTON POST

3M Co. announced Tuesday it would stop making many of its well-known Scotchgard stain-repellent products after finding that one of the chemical compounds used to make the products persists in the environment and is found in the bloodstream of people worldwide.

The substance, perfluorooctane sulfonate, is released in minute quantities by products as various as water-repellent coatings and fire-suppressing foams. It is made almost entirely by 3M, the huge St. Paul-based firm known formally as Minnesota Mining & Manufacturing Co.

Studies have not demonstrated any hazards to human health from the compound, known as PFOS. Like many synthetic compounds, however, it has proved toxic to laboratory animals at high doses.

"We have tested it pretty widely--not only in this country but in other countries, as well--and it's found in very low levels everywhere we test," said Bill Coyne, 3M's senior vice president for research and development. "It is persistent and pervasive, and that is the reason we don't want to continue to add it to the environment."

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“Persistent and pervasive” man-made compounds have been among the biggest environmental headaches. . . . For some, such as the pesticide DDT and the insulating fluid PCB, the toxic effects are clear. For others, there is no clear hazard. However, any compound that doesn’t easily degrade is a source of worry.

“It’s not a rare occurrence that we do have persistent chemicals in the environment, but it’s an area that is very much a concern to the agency,” said Stephen Johnson of the Environmental Protection Agency’s office of prevention, pesticides and toxic substances. He said EPA supported 3M’s decision.

Gina Solomon, a physician and senior scientist at the Natural Resources Defense Council, an environmental group, praised the company for “removing the product before there is absolute scientific proof of harm. . . . If companies had taken the same kind of precautionary action with DDT and PCB, then we wouldn’t be in the same bad situation we’re in now.”

PFOS has been used since the 1950s, and 3M health officials have been measuring its concentrations in its workers since the 1970s, as well as monitoring their health.

“There have been no health effects in our employee population,” said Larry Zobel, a physician and the company’s corporate medical director. “People should know that these workers have no health effects related to these materials—that is the bottom line of 30 years of medical monitoring.”

Several years ago, however, company chemists gained the ability to measure PFOS in extremely small concentrations. In tests of stored blood from around the world, they found it in the bloodstream of people in the United States, Japan, Europe and China at levels of 10 to 100 parts per billion. When the ultra-sensitive test was done on numerous blood samples drawn in the 1980s, it was absent, suggesting the compound was beginning to accumulate in human tissue.

That finding led the company to do further toxicological studies on laboratory animals. In one, massive doses were given to rats, whose offspring subsequently showed high death rates soon after birth. Previous studies, at lower doses, had shown no birth defects or high death rates in the animals.

The company notified the EPA of the latest rat study in September 1998 and met with agency officials several months later, Zobel said. In March, the company and the EPA reviewed the data again, and the company decided to cease production of PFOS by the end of the year.

There are no immediate substitutes for the compound, although the company is searching for them, Coyne said. The company will also stop making a second, related compound, called perfluorooctanoic acid, which is used in industrial

processes and does not appear in consumer products. A small amount of PFOS may continue to be manufactured for use in fire-retardant foams, he added.

Innumerable consumer products contain PFOS in trace amounts. The compound is given off by coatings made by 3M and put on furniture fabric, carpets, car upholstery and food packaging to repel oil and water. These coatings can be applied by the manufacturer of the finished product or sometimes by consumers themselves.

"The surprise wasn't that it was in our workers--that's something we've known for some time," said Charles Reich, 3M's executive vice president of specialty material markets. "It was a complete surprise that it was in the blood bank supplies."

The company said the affected product lines account for \$320 million in sales, about 2% of the company's annual sales of \$16 billion. It said it would take a one-time charge of \$200 million this year to reflect the product phase-out.

The stock market Tuesday applauded the move, with the stock closing at \$90.06, up \$4.13.

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